

Child and Family Services Update

May 30, 2003

Thanks For The Great Attendance At Our Third Annual Indian Child Welfare Conference!

By Savania Tsosie, Child and Family Services State ICWA Specialist

The 3rd Annual Indian Child Welfare Conference was held on May 7th, at the Salt Lake Community College's Miller Campus in Sandy. This was our best-attended conference yet! This year's theme was "Keeping Identity by Seeking to Identify." The Indian Child Welfare Planning Committee chose this theme to emphasize the importance of making every effort to identify each child who might be subject to the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA). We hope it gave all who attended a better mental picture of why this act is so important, and how we can help.

How did we come to select this particular theme? We asked ourselves, "Why is it so important to identify Indian children?" First and foremost, because of a law that was passed in 1978 called the "Indian Child Welfare Act." This act gives Indian children a unique political status, not afforded other children, because of their being members of sovereign tribal governments. This political status is the basis for the enactment of the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 (Public Law No. 95-608, 92 Stat., 3069 codified at 25 U.S.C. §§1901-63). The purpose of the Indian Child Welfare Act was and is to preserve and strengthen our Indian families and their culture.

It is through our children that the elders' teachings, values, language, unique practices, traditions, and very identity are passed on and preserved. Secondly, "There are American Indian children who have a variety of features which may or may not be associated with 'looking Indian'. An Indian child's skin may range from very fair to very dark, and his or her eyes may be almost any color. Therefore, workers should never just assume that a child is NOT Indian, and assessment of ancestry should occur with every child referred for protective services" (quote from Resource Guide for Indian Child Welfare Practice: Ensuring Safety and Permanence for Indian Children).

In the Plenary Session, a Veteran's Honor Song was sung for Lori Piestewa, mother, American Indian woman, and Soldier in the 507th Maintenance Company, who did not return from Iraq. Honor songs were also sung for all Indian foster parents (living on and off the reservation); there were ten of these families that attended the conference. To show appreciation for Child and Family Services workers, we also honored you also. Thank you! Honor songs are special songs sung to honor a particular person or persons. It is customary to stand in silence to show respect when an honor song is sung. Honor songs are always announced before they are sung.

The Keynote Address, entitled "Circle of Life," spoke of the ancient symbol used by almost all the American Indian people of North and South American, "The Medicine Wheel." The Medicine Wheel symbolizes the individual journey that we each must take to find our own path. Within the Medicine Wheel are the Four Cardinal Directions and the Four Sacred Colors. The Circle represents the Circle of Life and the

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Center of the Circle represents the Eternal Fire. The medicine wheel is sacred because the Creator caused everything in nature to be round -- the Sun, Sky, Earth, and Moon. Quoted from distributed material, "The medicine wheel can be used to help us in the mental health field to see and understand things we can't quite see and understand, because they are mental health issues and not physical objects."

Tribal Representatives from the Navajo Nation, the Ute Tribe, the Goshute Tribe, and the Paiute Tribe, along with two state employees were presenters for the five breakout sessions. The presenters delivered information that would enhance effective collaboration and coordination between Child and Family Services and the Tribes in the delivery of services to Indian children and families and compliance with the Indian Child Welfare Act.

We had a wonderful panel who told their own stories and touched our hearts. Those who participated on the panel were: Judge Debra Ridley, Ute Tribal Judge from Ft. Duchesne; Judge Teresa Sprouse, Goshute Tribal Judge from Nevada; Nona Etsitty, Navajo Nation Legal Advocate from Window Rock, Arizona; Paul Tsosie, American Indian Attorney from SLC; Judge William Thorne, Appellate Court Judge from SLC; and Mollie McDonald, Guardian Ad Litem from SLC.

I would like to sincerely and personally THANK all those on the planning committee for their commitment to making this conference a success. Thank you -- Aaron Bettinson, Spence Morgan, Larry Dennison, Minnie Grant, Melissa Oppenheim, Robert De Poe, Janet Canyon, Jo Overton, Myrna Gooden, and Jan Watts. It would be ungrateful of me if I did not also THANK the Navajo, Paiute, Goshute, and Ute Tribal people who participated, and everyone who attended, participated, and helped out in any way. Thank you all for your support!

I would like to thank all my co-workers from Child and Family Services for being at the conference and especially for the very important work that you are doing for all the children. I'd like to end with a quote from Sitting Bull, "Let us put our minds together, and see what life we will make for our children."